

The Last Men

(excerpt from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Friedrich Nietzsche, prologue, part v)

When Zarathustra had spoken, he again looked at the people, and was silent. “There they stand,” said he to his heart; “there they laugh: they understand me not; I am not the mouth for these ears.

Must one first batter their ears, that they may learn to hear with their eyes? Must one clatter like kettledrums and penitential preachers? Or do they only believe the stammerer?

They have something whereof they are proud. What do they call it, that which maketh them proud? Culture, they call it; it distinguisheth them from the goatherds.

They dislike, therefore, to hear of ‘contempt’ of themselves. So I will appeal to their pride.

I will speak unto them of the most contemptible thing: that, however, is THE LAST MAN!”

And thus spake Zarathustra unto the people:

It is time for man to fix his goal. It is time for man to plant the germ of his highest hope.

Still is his soil rich enough for it. But that soil will one day be poor and exhausted, and no lofty tree will any longer be able to grow thereon.

Alas! there cometh the time when man will no longer launch the arrow of his longing beyond man—and the string of his bow will have unlearned to whizz!

I tell you: one must still have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star. I tell you: ye have still chaos in you.

Alas! There cometh the time when man will no longer give birth to any star. Alas! There cometh the time of the most despicable man, who can no longer despise himself.

Lo! I show you THE LAST MAN:

“What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?” so asketh the last man.

The earth hath then become small, and on it there hoppeth the last man who maketh everything small. His species is ineradicable like that of the ground-flea; the last man liveth longest.

“We have discovered happiness,” say the last men.

They have left the regions where it is hard to live; for they need warmth.

Turning ill and being distrustful, they consider sinful: they walk warily. He is a fool who still stumbleth over stones or men!

A little poison now and then: that maketh pleasant dreams. And much poison at last for a pleasant death.

One still worketh, for work is a pastime. But one is careful lest the pastime should hurt one.

One no longer becometh poor or rich; both are too burdensome. Who still wanteth to rule? Who still wanteth to obey? Both are too burdensome.

No shepherd, and one herd! Every one wanteth the same; every one is equal: he who hath other sentiments goeth voluntarily into the madhouse.

“Formerly all the world was insane,” say the subtlest of them.

People still fall out, but are soon reconciled; otherwise it spoileth their stomachs.

They have their little pleasures for the day, and their little pleasures for the night.

“We have discovered happiness,” say the last men.

In the World Where God Is Dead

(excerpt from *Ride the Tiger* by Julius Evola)

European Nihilism: The Dissolution of Morals

For the symbolic expression of the complex process that has led to the present situation of crisis in matters of morals and the vision of life, the best formulation is that of Nietzsche: "God is dead."

For our purposes, we can take Nietzsche's theme as our point of departure, because it has lost nothing of its validity and relevance. It has been rightly said that Nietzsche's personality and thought also have a symbolic character. Robert Reininger writes: "This is a struggle for the sake of modern man, that man who no longer has any roots in the sacred soil of tradition, wavering in search of himself between the peaks of civilization and the abysses of barbarism, trying to find a satisfactory meaning for an existence completely left to itself."

Friedrich Nietzsche is the one who best foresaw "European nihilism" as a future and a destiny "which proclaims itself everywhere by the voice of a thousand signs and a thousand presages." The "great event, obscurely suspected, that God is dead," is the principle of the collapse of all values. From this point, morality is deprived of its sanction and "incapable of maintaining itself," and the interpretation and justification formerly given to all norms and values disappear.

Dostoyevsky expressed the same idea in the words, "If God does not exist, everything is permitted."

"The death of God" is an image that characterizes a whole historical process. The phrase expresses "unbelief turned to daily reality," a desacralization of existence and a total rift with the world of Tradition that, beginning in the West at about the period of the Renaissance and humanism, has increasingly assumed the character of an obvious and irreversible state of affairs for present-day humanity. This state is no less real where it is not yet clearly visible, owing to a regime of doubles and surrogates of the "God who is dead."

We must distinguish various stages of the process in question. The elementary fact is a fracture of an ontological character, through which human life loses any real reference to transcendence. All the developments of nihilism are already virtually contained in this fact. Morality rendered independent from theology and metaphysics and founded on the sole authority of reason—so-called "autonomous" morality—is the first phenomenon to take shape after the death of God, trying to hide it from consciousness. When the level of the sacred is lost, the absolute principle descends to the level of pure human morality. This defines the rationalistic phase of the "stoicism of duty" and of "moral fetishism," which, incidentally, is one of the characteristics of Protestantism. In speculative philosophy, this phase has as its sign or symbol the Kantian theory of the categorical imperative, ethical rationalism, and "autonomous morality."

But once morality has lost its root, which is the original and effective relationship of man with a higher world, it ceases to have any invulnerable foundation, and the critics soon have the better of it. In "autonomous morality," which is secular and rational, the only resistance to any natural impulse is an empty and rigid command, a "thou shalt" that is a mere echo of the ancient, living law. Then at the point where one tries to give this "thou shalt" some firm content and to justify that content, the ground gives way: there is no support for those capable of thinking it through to the end. This is already the case with Kantian ethics. In reality, there is no "imperative" at this stage that does not imply the presumed, axiomatic value of certain unexplained premises that depend simply on a personal equation or on the accepted state of affairs in a given society.

The phase of dissolution that follows that of ethical rationalism is defined by utilitarian or "social" ethics. Renouncing any intrinsic or absolute basis for "good" and "evil," the justification proposed for what is left of moral norms is whatever suits the individual for his own advantage and for his material tranquility in social life. But nihilism is already visible behind this morality. When there is no longer any internal restraint, every action and behavior appears licit so long as the outer sanctions of society's laws can be avoided, or if one is indifferent to them. Nothing any longer has an intrinsic norm and an imperative character. It is just a matter of adjusting to society's codes, which take the place of the superseded laws of religion. After Puritanism and ethical rigorism, this is the orientation of the bourgeois world: toward social idols and conformism founded on convenience, cowardice, hypocrisy, or inertia. But the individualism of the end of the nineteenth century marked in its turn the beginning of an anarchic dissolution that rapidly spread and intensified. It had already prepared the chaos hiding behind the facade of apparent orderliness.

The previous phase, limited in its extent, had been that of the Romantic hero: the man who feels himself alone in the face of divine indifference, and the superior individual who despite everything reaffirms himself in a tragic context. He breaks accepted laws, but not in the sense of denying their validity; rather, he claims for himself exceptional rights to what is forbidden, be it good or ill. The process exhausts itself, for example, in a man like Max Stirner, who saw in all morality the ultimate form of the divine fetish that was to be destroyed. He denounced the "beyond" that exists within man and that tries to give him rules as being a "new heaven" that is merely the insidious transposition of the external, theological beyond, which has been negated. With this conquest of the "interior god" and the exaltation of the "Unique" that is free from rules and "rests its cause on nothingness," opposing itself to every value and pretense of society, Stirner marks the end of the road trodden by the nihilistic social revolutionaries (to whom the term nihilism was originally applied)—but trodden in the name of Utopian social ideas in which they always believed: ideas such as "justice," "liberty," and "humanity," as opposed to the injustice and tyranny that they saw in the existing order.

Turning to Nietzsche, the European nihilism that he predicted as a general, not just a sporadic, phenomenon attacks not only the field of morality in a strict sense, but also that of truth, of worldviews, and of ends. The "death of God" is associated with this loss of any meaning to life, any superior justification for existence. Nietzsche's theme is well known: that a need for evasion and a surrender of life have brought about the invention of a "world of truth" or a "world of values" separate from, and in opposition to, this world, now characterized as false and worthless. Another world has been invented: a world of being, goodness, and spirit as a negation or condemnation of the world of becoming, of the senses, and of living reality. But that constructed world dissolved, once it was discovered that it was an illusion. Nietzsche revealed its genesis and pointed out its human—"all too human"—and irrational roots. His contribution to nihilism as a "free spirit" and "immoralist" has been precisely his interpretation of certain "superior" and "spiritual" values not only as simple vital impulses, but in most cases as the results of a "decadent" and enfeebled life.

On these terms, all that remains real is what had been negated or rejected from the point of view of that other, "superior" world of "God" and "truth"—the world of what ought to be, not of what is. The conclusion is that "what ought to be is not; what is, is what ought not to be." This is what Nietzsche called the "tragic phase" of nihilism. It is the beginning of the "misery of man without God." Existence seems devoid of any meaning, any goal. While all imperatives, moral values, and restraints have fallen away, so have all supports. Once more we find a parallel in Dostoyevsky, where Kirilov asserts that man invented God just to be able to go on living: God, therefore, as an "alienation of the I." The terminal situation is given in drastic form by Sartre, when he declares that "existentialism is not an atheism in the sense of being reduced to proving that God does not exist. Rather it says that even if God existed, nothing would change." Existence is reduced to itself in its naked reality, without any reference point outside itself that could give it a real meaning for man.

Thus there are two phases. The first is a sort of metaphysical or moral rebellion. The second is the phase in which the very motives that had implicitly nourished that rebellion give way and dissolve. For a new type of man, they are empty. That is the nihilistic phase in the proper sense, whose chief theme is the sense of the absurdity, the pure irrationality of the human condition.

From the Precursors of Nihilism to the "Lost Youth" and the Protest Movement

A current of thought and a "historiography" exist that represent this process of rebellion and dissolution, or at least its first phases, as having been something positive and as a victory. It is another aspect of contemporary nihilism, whose undeclared basis is a sort of "shipwreck euphoria." It is well known that the phases of dissolution, beginning with illuminism and liberalism and proceeding gradually to immanentist historicism (first "idealistic," then materialist and Marxist), have been interpreted and celebrated as those of the emancipation and reaffirmation of man, of progress of the spirit, and of true "humanism." We shall see later how Nietzsche's program for the postnihilist period arose, in its worse aspects, out of this very mentality. For the present, there is just one point to be made.

No God has ever controlled man. Divine despotism is a fantasy, and so is most of that to which, in the illuminist and revolutionary interpretation, the world of Tradition owes its ordering from above and its orientation toward the above, its hierarchical system, its various forms of legitimate authority and sacral power. No—the true and essential foundation of this whole system is the particular inner structure, the capacity of recognition, and the various inborn interests of a type of man who nowadays has virtually

disappeared. Man, at a given moment, wanted to "be free." He was allowed to be so, and he was allowed to throw off the chains that did not bind him so much as sustain him. Thereupon he was allowed to suffer all the consequences of his liberation, following ineluctably up to his present state in which "God is dead" (or "God has withdrawn," as Bernanos says), and existence becomes the field of absurdity where everything is possible and everything is allowed. Nothing has acted in all of this but the law that is known in the Far East as the law of actions and reactions, which is objectively "beyond good and evil" and beyond any petty morality.

In recent times, the fracture has extended from the moral plane to the existential and ontological. Values that were previously questioned and shaken only by a few precursors in relative isolation now lose all relevance for general consciousness in everyday life. One is no longer dealing with "problems" but with a state of affairs in which the immoralist pathos of yesterday's rebels seems increasingly old-fashioned and incongruous. For some time, a good part of Western humanity has considered it a natural thing for existence to lack any real meaning, and for it not to be ordered by any higher principle, arranging their lives in the most bearable and least disagreeable way they can. Of course this has its counterpart and inevitable consequence in an inner life that is more and more reduced, formless, feeble, and elusive, and in a growing dissolution of any uprightness and character. Another aspect of the same process is a regime of compensations and anesthetics that is no less deceptive for not being recognized as such. A character in Hemingway summarizes it when he says:

"Religion is the opium of the people . . . And now economics is the opium of the people; along with patriotism . . . What about sexual intercourse; was that an opium of the people? . . . But drink was a sovereign opium of the people, oh, an excellent opium. Although some prefer the radio, another opium of the people, a cheap one . . ."

But once this sensation occurs, the facade may start to waver, the assemblage to collapse, and the dissolution of values is followed by the denial of everything one has resorted to in order to make up for the senselessness of a life henceforth reduced to itself. Then comes the existential theme of nausea and disgust, of the void that is sensed behind the whole system of bourgeois life, the theme of the absurdity of the whole new, earthbound "civilization." Where the sensation is most acute there occur forms of existential trauma and states that have been called "the spectrality of events," "the degradation of objective reality," "existential alienation." One also notices that the sporadic experiences of intellectuals and artists of the past become modes of behavior occurring in the natural course of things for certain groups of the younger generation.

Only yesterday it was a matter of writers, painters, and "damned poets" living on the edge, often alcoholics, mingling their talents with the climate of existential dissolution and with irrational rebellion against established values. Typical in this regard is the case of Rimbaud, whose extreme form of rebellion was the renunciation of his own genius, poetic silence, and immersion in practical activity. Another is the case of Lautreamont, driven by existential trauma to the morbid exaltation of evil, horror, and formless elementarity (Maldoror, the personage of his poems, says that Tie has "received life like a wound, and forbidden the suicide from curing his injury"). Then there are those isolated individuals given to adventure, like Jack London and the early Ernst Jiinger, who seek new horizons on distant lands and seas; while for the others everything seems in order, safe and sound, as under the banner of science they hymn the triumphal march of progress, scarcely troubled by the noise of anarchist bombs.

Already after World War I, processes of this type had begun to spread, announcing the final phases of nihilism. At first such harbingers remained at the margins of life, on the frontier-zone of art. The most

significant and radical of them all was perhaps Dadaism, the end result of the deepest impulses that had nourished the various movements of avant-garde art. But Dadaism negated the very categories of art, showing the transition to the chaotic forms of a life deprived of any rationality, any restraint, any coherence; it was not just the acceptance but the exaltation of the absurd and the contradictory, of nonsense and pointlessness taken just as they are.

Surrealism took up some similar themes, in part, when it refused to adapt life to the "derisory conditions of all existence down here." Sometimes the path was in fact followed to the very end, as with the suicide of surrealists like Vache, Crevel, and Rigault; the latter reproached the others for being able to do nothing but literature and poetry. Indeed, when the young Andre Breton declared that the simplest surrealist act would be to go out into the street and shoot passersby at random, he was anticipating what happened more than once after World War II, when some of the younger generation passed from theory to practice. By absurd and destructive actions, they sought to attain the only possible meaning of existence, after rejecting suicide as the radical solution for the metaphysically abandoned individual.

With the further traumatization brought about by World War II, and with the collapse of a new set of false values, the same current was effectively diffused in characteristic and endemic fashion among a youth that regarded itself as burned-out or lost. Its broad margin of inauthenticity, pose, and caricature does not lessen its value as a living sign of the times now approaching their final nadir.

On the one hand there were the "rebels without a cause," the "angry young men" with their rage and aggression in a world where they felt like strangers, where they saw no sense, no values worth embracing and fighting for. As we have seen, that was the liquidation, in the world where God is dead, of those previous forms of revolt that, despite everything—and even in Utopian anarchism—still had a fundamental belief in a just cause to defend, at the price of any destruction and at the sacrifice of one's own life. "Nihilism" there referred to the negation of the values of the world and of the society against which one was rebelling, not to those of the rebels themselves. But in its current forms, the rebellion is a sheer, irrational movement "without a flag."

This trend appeared with the "teddy boys," with their German analogs the Halbstarcken, and the *generazione delle macerie* [generation of rubble]. Their style was one of aggressive protest, expressed through vandalism and lawless actions valued as "pure acts" in cold witness to their otherness. In the Slavic countries there were the "hooligans." More significant was the American counterpart, the "hipsters" and the Beat generation. Rather than intellectual attitudes, these were existential positions lived out by the young, of which a certain type of novel is merely a reflection. Compared to the British types, they were more cold and unadorned, more corrosive in their opposition to everything pseudoorderly, rational, and coherent—everything that was "square," meaning solid, justified, and safe. They showed "a destructive, voiceless rage," as somebody put it, a contempt for "those incomprehensible characters who are capable of being seriously involved with a woman, a job, a cause" (Norman Podhoretz). The absurdity of what is considered normal, "the organized insanity of the normal world," seemed all the more evident to the hipsters in the climate of industrialization and frenetic activity that, despite all the triumphs of science, was meaningless. Alienation from their surroundings, absolute refusal to collaborate or to have any defined position in society were the rule in this milieu, which did not only include the young, and which recruited its members not only from the lower classes but from all social levels, including the wealthy. Some preferred a new form of nomadic existence; others, to live at the most elementary level. The methods used by the hipsters to survive the existential void through strong sensations included alcohol, sex, negro jazz, high speed, drugs, and even acts of gratuitous criminality like those suggested in Breton's surrealism. They did not fear experiences of any kind, but sought them out to "receive

tremendous blows on their own selves" (Norman Mailer). The books of Jack Kerouac and the poetry of Allen Ginsberg were inspired in part by this climate.

But it had already been announced by some authors who were rightly called the Walt Whitmans, not of the optimistic and hopeful world of the young American democracy, but of a world in collapse. Beside Dos Passos and others of the same group, the early Henry Miller may be called the spiritual father of the currents under discussion. It has been said of him that he is "more than a writer or an artist, a kind of collective phenomenon of his epoch—an incarnate and vociferous phenomenon, a raw manifestation of the anguish, the furious despair, and the infinite horror extending behind the crumbling facade." It is the sense of a tabula rasa, the cosmic silence, the void, the end of a whole epoch, "in a prophet who proclaims the end of a world at the very moment when it is flowering and radiating, at the apogee of its grandeur and its pestilential contagion."

Miller himself wrote these characteristic words: "From the beginning it was never anything but chaos: it was a fluid which enveloped me, which I breathed in through the gills." "A stone forest the center of which was chaos" is the sensation of the ambience in which today's man moves. "Sometimes in the dead center, in that very heart of chaos, I danced or drank myself silly, or I made love, or I befriended someone, or I planned a new life, but it was all chaos, all stone, and all hopeless and bewildering."

A partly convergent testimony from another direction is that which Hermann Hesse puts into the mouth of one of his characters: "I'd rather feel burned by a diabolic pain than to live in these sanely temperate surroundings. A wild desire flares up in me for intense emotions, sensations, a rage against this whole toneless, flat, normal, sterilized life, and a wish to destroy something—perhaps a warehouse, a cathedral, or myself—and to commit outrageous follies. . . . This in fact is what I have always most hated, abhorred, and cursed: this satisfaction, this complacent healthiness, this plump bourgeois optimism, this life of the mediocre, normal, common man." Paul van den Bosch, in his *Les enfants de Vabsurde*, wrote: "We are the ghosts of a war that we have not fought. . . . Having opened our eyes on a disenchanting world, we are more than any others the children of the absurd. On certain days, the senselessness of the world weighs on us like a deformity. It seems to us that God has died of old age, and we exist without a goal. . . . We are not embittered; we start from zero. We were born among the ruins. When we were born, the gold was already transmuted into lead."

The heritage of the precursors of European nihilism has largely been translated, in these movements of ruined youth, into the crude forms of life as it is lived. An important trait here is the absence of any social-revolutionary motive and the belief that no organized action can change things. That is the difference from the left-wing intellectuals who condemn bourgeois society, and from the nihilists of the past. "Work, read, prepare in groups, believe, then have your back broken—no thanks, that's not for me," says one of Kerouac's characters. This is the end result at which the "revolution" of the left has practically arrived after its triumph, after passing the phase of simple revolt. Camus made it quite plain after the period of his communist illusions: The revolution has betrayed its origins with the constitution of new yokes and a new conformism, more obtuse and absurd than ever.

It is not necessary to dwell any further on these testimonies of a traumatized existence, nor on those whom one might call the "martyrs of modern progress." As I have said, all that interests us here is their value as symptomatic indices of the times. The forms mentioned here have also degenerated into extravagant and ephemeral fashions. But there is no denying the causal and necessary connection that unites them to the world where "God is dead" and no substitute has yet been found for him. When these

forms pass, others of the same type will certainly crop up, according to circumstances, until the present cycle is exhausted.

Disguises of European Nihilism: The Socioeconomic Myth and the Protest Movement

It is an important fact that some of the young people in crisis have shown such indifference to the prospects of social revolution. But now it is time to broaden our horizons by showing the particular type of evasion and anesthetization, on the part of a humanity that has lost the meaning of existence, that lurks behind the varieties of the modern socioeconomic myth, both that of Western "prosperity" and that of Marxist-communist ideology. In both cases, we still find ourselves within the orbit of nihilism, and a nihilism of far more spectacular proportions than those of the extremist groups where the crisis remains acute and undisguised.

I have already shown that the actual basis of the myth in question is the interpretation, on the part of a well-organized historiography, of the processes that prepared for European nihilism as constituting progress. This basis is essentially identical both in the "Western" myth and in that of communism. But the two of them are in a kind of dialectical relationship, which reveals their true existential significance.

It is easier to find the elements that betray this ultimate sense in the communist myth, because of its blatant coarseness and its more explicit reference to the basic motive: the economy. As is well known, the communist myth takes the form of a violent polemic against all the phenomena of spiritual crisis that I have treated up to now. These phenomena are recognized, certainly, but are blamed on bourgeois decadence, the fin de siècle, and anarchic individualism: the symptoms of bourgeois elements alienated from reality. These are supposed to be the terminal stages of decomposition of a doomed economic system, that of capitalism. The crisis is thus presented exclusively as one of values and ideals serving as superstructure to that system, which, having become hypocritical and deceptive, have nothing more to do with the practical conduct of individuals or with the driving forces of the epoch. Humanity's existential lesion is generally explained as an effect of material, economic organization in a society such as the capitalist one. The true remedy, the start of a "new and authentic humanism," a human integrity and a "happiness never known before," would then be furnished by the setting up of a different socioeconomic system, by the abolition of capitalism, and by the institution of a communist society of workers, such as is taking place in the Soviet area. Karl Marx had already praised in communism "the real appropriation of the human essence on the part of man and for the sake of man, the return of man to himself as a social being, thus as a human man," seeing in it the equivalent of a perfect naturalism and even a true humanism.

In its radical forms, wherever this myth is affirmed through the control of movements, organizations, and people, it is linked to a corresponding education, a sort of psychic lobotomy intended methodically to neutralize and infantilize any form of higher sensibility and interest, every way of thought that is not in terms of the economy and socioeconomic processes. Behind the myth is the most terrible void, which acts as the worst opiate yet administered to a rootless humanity. Yet this deception is no different from the myth of prosperity, especially in the form it has taken in the West. Oblivious of the fact that they are living on a volcano, materially, politically, and in relation to the struggle for world domination, Westerners enjoy a technological euphoria, encouraged by the prospects of the "second industrial revolution" of the atomic age.

I have mentioned a type of dialectic that leads to the demolition of this theory from the inside, insofar as in the communist world the myth has drawn most of its energy from a misrepresentation. The idea of states in which "individual" problems and "decadent" crises no longer exist is presented as something only to be attained in the future, whereas these are the very conditions already obtained in the West and the Nordic countries. It is the fascination of a goal that vanishes at the moment one reaches it. In fact, the future socioeconomic ideal of proletarian humanity already exists, spiritually bought and paid for, in Western society, where, to the shame of Marx and Engels' prognosis, a climate of prosperity has spread to vast social strata in the form of a plentiful, easy, and comfortable existence—a condition that Marxism does not condemn as such, but only because it thinks of it as the privilege of an upper class of capitalist "exploiters," not as the common property of a homogenized society. But the horizons are essentially the same, and in regard to recent developments, we shall see what conclusions the so-called protest movement has drawn from them.

At all events, the error and the illusion are the same in both socioeconomic ideologies, namely the serious assumption that existential misery can be reduced to suffering in one way or another from material want, and to impoverishment due to a given socioeconomic system. They assume that misery is greater among the disinherited or the proletariat than among those living in prosperous or privileged economic conditions, and that it will consequently diminish with the "freedom from want" and the general advance of the material conditions of existence. The truth of the matter is that the meaning of existence can be lacking as much in one group as in the other, and that there is no correlation between material and spiritual misery. Only to the lowest and dullest levels of society can one preach the formula for all human happiness and wholeness as the well-named "animal ideal," a well-being that is little better than bovine. Hegel rightly wrote that the epochs of material well-being are blank pages in the history book, and Toynbee has shown that the challenge to mankind of environmentally and spiritually harsh and problematic conditions is often the incentive that awakens the creative energies of civilization. In some cases, it is not paradoxical to say that the man of good will should try to make life difficult for his neighbor! It is a commonplace that all the higher virtues attenuate and atrophy under easy conditions, when man is not forced to prove himself in some way; and in the final analysis it does not matter in such situations if a good number fall away and are lost through natural selection. Andre Breton was right when he wrote that "we must prevent the artificial precariousness of social conditions from concealing the real precariousness of the human condition."

But to avoid straying too far from my argument, the point is that the most acute forms of the modern existential crisis are appearing today at the margin of a civilization of prosperity, as witness the currents in the new generation that have been described. One sees there rebellion, disgust, and anger manifesting not in a wretched and oppressed subproletariat, but often in young people who lack nothing, even in millionaires' children. And among other things it is a significant fact, statistically proven, that suicide is much rarer in poor countries than in rich ones, showing that the problematic life is felt more in the latter than in the former. Blank despair can occur right up to the finishing-post of socioeconomic messianism, as in the musical comedy about a Utopian island where they have everything, "fun, women, and whiskey," but also the ever-recurrent sense of the emptiness of existence, the sense that something is still missing.

There exists, therefore, no correlation, except possibly a negative one, between the meaning of life and conditions of economic well-being. There is a famous example, not recent but from the traditional world, of the Buddha Shakyamuni. He who on a metaphysical plane radically denounced the emptiness of existence and the deceptions of the "god of life," pointing out the way of spiritual awakening, was not a victim of oppression and hunger, not a representative of social strata like the plebeians of the Roman

empire, to whom the revolutionary sermons of Christianity were first addressed; no, he was of the race of princes, in all the splendor of his power and all the fullness of his youth. The true significance of the socioeconomic myth, in any of its forms, is as a means of internal anesthetization or prophylaxis, aimed at evading the problem of an existence robbed of any meaning and at consolidating in every way the fundamental insignificance of modern man's life. We may therefore speak either of an opiate that is much more real than that which, according to the Marxists, was fed to a humanity as yet unilluminated and unevolved, mystified by religious beliefs, or, from another point of view, of the organized method of an active nihilism. The prospects in a goodly part of today's world are more or less those that Zarathustra attributed to the "last man": "The time is near of the most despicable of men, who can no longer despise himself," the last man "of the tenacious and pullulating race." "We have invented happiness, say the last men with a wink," having "abandoned the lands where life is hard."

In this context, there is another more recent phenomenon that is heavy with significance: that of the so-called global protest movement. It took its rise in part from the order of ideas already mentioned. In the wake of theories such as Marcuse's, it came to the conclusion that there is a basic similarity, in terms of technological consumer society, between the system of advanced communist countries and that of the capitalist world, because in the former, the original impulse of the proletarian revolution is much diminished. This impulse has now been realized, inasmuch as the working class has entered the consumer system, being assured of a lifestyle that is no longer proletarian but bourgeois: the very thing whose absence was the incentive for revolution. But alongside this convergence there has become visible the conditioning power of one and the same "system," manifesting as the tendency to destroy all the higher values of life and personality. At the level more or less corresponding to the "last man" foreseen by Nietzsche, the individual in contemporary consumer society reckons that it would be too expensive, indeed absurd, to do without the comfort and well-being that this evolved society offers him, merely for the sake of an abstract freedom. Thus he accepts with a good grace all the leveling conditionings of the system. This realization has caused a bypassing of revolutionary Marxism, now deprived of its original motive force, in favor of a "global protest" against the system. This movement, however, also lacks any higher principle: it is irrational, anarchic, and instinctive in character. For want of anything else, it calls on the abject minorities of outsiders, on the excluded and rejected, sometimes even on the Third World (in which case Marxist fantasies reappear) and on the blacks, as being the only revolutionary potential. But it stands under the sign of nothingness: it is a hysterical "revolution of the void and the 'underground,'" of "maddened wasps trapped in a glass jar, who throw themselves frenetically against the walls." In all of this it confirms in another way the general nihilistic character of the epoch, and indeed on a much larger scale, for the current protest is no longer that of the individuals and small groups mentioned earlier, whose intellectual level was indubitably higher.

Another point should be mentioned, at least cursorily, in the current climate of dissolution. The collapse of superstructures—of all that can henceforth only be regarded as superstructures—did not manifest only in the sociological form of denouncing the lies and hypocrisy of bourgeois life (as in Max Nordau, or as in the words of Relling to Gregers in Ibsen: "Why do you use that odd word 'ideals'? We have our own perfectly good word: 'lies'") or in moral and philosophical nihilism. It is prolonged and completed today by means of a science that, though false and contaminating if applied to men of other times and other civilizations, has the power of persuasion when applied to traumatized modern man; this science is none other than psychoanalysis. The impassioned effort of that philosopher who sought out the secret origin, the "genealogy" of predominant moral values at the very roots of all those vital impulses that morality avoids or condemns, who sought thus to "naturalize" morality by denying it any autonomous or preeminent dignity, this impassioned effort has given place to the cold, cynical, and "scientific" methods of "depth psychology," of the exploration of the subconscious and the unconscious. In the latter, the

irrational subsoil of existence, it has recognized the motive force essential to the whole life of the soul; from that it deduces the proofs that make an illusion of the upper world of moral and social conscience with all its values, all its inhibitions and prohibitions, and its hysterical will to dominate. Meanwhile, in the subterranean zone nothing is at work but a mess of compulsions toward pleasure and death: Lustprinzip and Todestrieb.

This, as everyone knows, is the essence of Freudianism. Other psychoanalytic currents that diverge in part from Freud are not substantially different. The evident theme in all of them is the regression to the psychic subsoil, together with a profound traumatization of the human personality. It is one further aspect of contemporary nihilism, and, moreover, the symptom of a sickly consciousness, too weak to hold in check the lower regions of the soul with their so-called archetypes, and which might well be compared to Goethe's "world of the Mothers."

It is hardly worth pointing out how these destructions converge with the atmosphere of another typical genre of contemporary literature, in which the sense of the "spectrality of existence" is associated with that of an obscure, incomprehensible destiny, a fatality, and an absurd condemnation hanging over man's eternal solitude, taken to be the actual human condition. It is like the sense of an incomprehensible foundation of human life that fades into impenetrable and anguish-filled darkness. This theme, shown in its typical form by Kafka, is not foreign to speculative existentialism, to which I shall return in due course. What I wish to underline at this point is that we are not dealing with a truth discovered by someone who "has been able to feel more and see more deeply"; it is merely what is perceived in the very atmosphere of European nihilism, and of a humanity that has taken shape after the death of God.

Compiled by Agrarian